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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BAGHDAD 000210

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SUBJECT: PROVINCIAL ELECTIONS: A SERIOUS CONTEST WITH SERIOUS NATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

REF: BAGHDAD 3917

Classified By: Acting DCM Robert Ford for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Iraq's provincial elections represent a milestone in the country's political progression. In general, the campaigns have been competitive, sometimes sharply so. Political parties and local officials in most regions have perceived the election commission to be competent and fair, if not perfect. Candidates are campaigning aggressively, the media is saturated with election-related information, and polling indicates a likely high level of participation. In order to maximize the credibility of the election process and working closely with the United Nations, the U.S. Mission and Coalition Forces are heavily involved in supporting the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC). We have provided logistical assistance and security, and Mission personnel and other international representatives will be observing the voting throughout the country.

¶2. (C) For Sunni Arabs, this is an opportunity to remedy the marginalization many felt after boycotting the 2005 provincial elections. For the Shi'a, the election highlights divisions between the Prime Minister's Dawa party and the rival Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) of Abdul-Aziz al-Hakim, and positions those parties for a high stakes clash in national elections planned for late 2009 or early 2010. Importantly, the Sadr trend, which also boycotted in 2005, has endorsed candidates and is urging its followers to vote. This election will trigger implementation of the Provincial Powers Law (PPL), which grants significant new power to provincial governments. It will also underscore divisions between Iraqis (such as the PM and many Sunni Arab nationalists) who favor a strong central government, and those (such as ISCI and the Kurds) who support greater power for provinces and regions. End Summary.

Iraqis Set to Vote Amidst Improved Security

¶3. (C) On January 31, Iraqi voters in 14 governorates will participate in Provincial Council elections. In comparison to the 2005 elections, the security situation is much improved, with much less violence than was the case in 2005. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) will vote in all provinces. According to IHEC, 14,431 candidates have registered to compete for 440 provincial council seats. IHEC plans to announce preliminary results by February 4, and certified results by February 23. Provincial Councils will be seated no later than 15 days after the certified results are issued, and will then have 30 days to select a governor.

¶4. (C) Iraq's political elite perceives high stakes in the election and is aggressively campaigning. Strong Sunni participation is expected, and the elections should help remedy the damage done by the Sunni boycott in 2005 and the subsequent underrepresentation in key provinces like Baghdad, Nineva, Salah ad-Din and Diyala.

¶ 15. (SBU) The PPL takes effect upon formation of new provincial councils. It defines the structure of provincial and local government (including the Governor), their authorities, and their relationship to the national government. The PPL grants councils the power to elect a governor and two deputies, and legislative authority relating to provincial administration and budgets. The PPL also establishes provincial government authority over executive bodies (including the power to nominate and fire police chiefs) within the province. Provincial governors will have the power to nominate senior officials, and have direct authority over local security agencies except the armed forces.

Voter Outreach

¶ 16. (C) The United Nations is leading voter outreach efforts and has established the International Electoral Assistance Team (IEAT) to coordinate. IEAT includes representatives from IHEC, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES - a USAID contractor). IHEC has directed all themes and messaging, and foreign partners, including the U.S. Mission and MNF-I, have provided technical assistance and logistical assistance. The UN, IFES and several NGOs funded by DRL provided IHEC with additional technical assistance, and produced and disseminated outreach products around the country, focusing particularly on the complexity of the ballot.

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¶ 17. (C) After Parliament passed the Provincial Election Law in September, IHEC was slow in developing messages and acknowledging the value of a comprehensive voter outreach strategy. The UN, the Embassy, MNF-I and others encouraged the Commissioners to increase IHEC outreach and public relations activities. State/DRL Bureau grantees International Research and Exchange Board (IREX), the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), the International Republican Institute (IRI), and others have produced and disseminated hundreds of thousands of posters and flyers, scores of newspaper supplements, and dozens of television and radio broadcasts with voter education, including how to vote on the complicated ballots. These materials augment IHEC messages, and have avoided partisanship. As Election Day approaches, Iraqi television and radio stations have been saturated with election outreach programming. Daily newspapers include several page sections showing candidate lists and mock ballots as well as descriptions of the security and logistics that voters may expect. The UN's Chief Elections Officer, Sandra Mitchell, told us that "outreach is as good as it can get; it has reached saturation." The outreach started slow but appears to finally be having an impact. An early January 2009 poll conducted for the National Democratic Institute showed that 68 percent of the respondents here said they felt very or somewhat informed about the new election system with its open lists.

U.S. Mission Support for Election Observation

¶ 18. (C) IHEC has invited 77 international organizations and all diplomatic missions in Iraq to credential election observers (Reftel). 375 U.S. Mission staff will deploy to polling centers in 17 Governorates on Election Day. A smaller number will observe special needs voting January 28, when Iraqi Security Forces and detainees will vote. Teams will include 43 U.S. Embassy observers, 183 PRT staff, and 85 security personnel.

¶ 9. (C) In addition to USG observers, observers from the following countries/organizations will participate: Turkey (24), the Arab League (20), the UK (14), EU Members of Parliament (4-7), Italy (6), Japan (6), Spain (5), Islamic Congress (5), the Assyrian Council of Europe (4), France (3), Denmark (3), Sweden (3), Norway (3), the EU Mission (2), Australia (2), Czech Republic (2), Greece (1), Netherlands (1), Poland (1), Romania (1), and Canada (1). The UN will field 26 observers on 11 teams in Baghdad, Basrah, Dahuk, Diyala, Erbil, Kirkuk, Ninewa, Salah ad-Din. The U.S. Mission and MNF-I are facilitating the movement of the majority of these observers.

Clean and Fair ?

¶ 10. (C) In general, we sense that the campaigns have allowed for real competition and real choices for the voters although there have certainly been exceptions and election law violations. A January 27 press report stated that IHEC had issued penalties against 70 political parties and entities for committing over 180 violations. In some southern provinces, candidates have told us they are concerned that ISCI/Badr controls the Governorate Election Offices (GEO). Vote-buying allegations are widespread, especially concerning ISCI/Badr, but also Da'wa. The turnout of Iraqi observers, both from NGOs and political parties, will be important to minimizing fraud.

¶ 11. (C) Two provinces appear to be particularly problematic. In Diyala, Sunni Arabs believe they were targeted by a politicized security operation launched last summer by the Prime Minister. Notably, many Sunni Arab Islamic Party activists either were arrested or harassed by Iraqi security units during the autumn and early winter. Although they apparently comprise a majority of the province's population, Sunni contacts in Diyala complain bitterly of intimidation, and predict fraud. Meanwhile, Kurdish and Shia political activists complain that voters who support them will not be able to vote because they didn't register as internally displaced and will not be able to get to their homes to vote due to Diyala's still difficult security climate.

¶ 12. (C) Meanwhile, the campaign in Ninewa has featured two high-profile assassinations (probably carried out by AQI or associated local groups) and some political harassment of Sunni Arab-led parties perpetrated by Peshmerga or Kurdish units of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), especially in Sinjar and Zumar (western Ninewa). The Kurds complained to

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us that thousands of their IDPs displaced from Ninewa never registered to vote as IDPs and hence won't get to vote. They have not pushed back much against our argument that the IDPs had a chance to register and when the voter lists are finished, they have to be finished. Significantly, IHEC has also refused to add names to the register. There could be post-election complaints of fraud if - as is likely - no party does as well as it expects. In sum, even in the province of Ninewa we think voters in most areas have a real choice and will have a fair chance to express their opinion via the polls.

Opportunity and Challenge for Iraqi Sunni Arabs

¶ 13. (C) After boycotting the 2005 provincial elections Sunni Arab representation in some key provincial councils, such as Ninewa, Diyala, Baghdad and Salah ad-Din was substantially less than their share of the voting population. In a January 2009 poll conducted for the National Democratic Institute, 68 percent of Sunni Arabs questioned said they were likely to vote in the provincial elections. Despite renewed political

engagement, the Sunni Arabs' impact in the elections may be diluted by internal divisions. Notably, and Vice President Hashimi's Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) is struggling to maintain its position as the preeminent Sunni Party.

¶14. (C) IIP interlocutors fear their constituency has eroded.

Hundreds of thousands of potential IIP voters have fled to Syria and Jordan, and there is a popular perception that the party has failed to capitalize on its participation in the national government or in Anbar, where it controls the provincial council, to improve government services or exerted sufficient leverage to counterbalance Maliki's consolidation of power. Some pundits here note a public preference for technocrats over religious parties. In this challenging environment, the IIP faces smaller Sunni groupings representing secular ex-Ba'thists (e.g. Saleh Mutlaq's Hewar, or in Ninewa, Athiel al-Nujaifi's Hadba), harder-line conservatives (e.g. ex-speaker Mahmoud Mashhadani's National Dialogue Council), and nascent tribal political groupings.

¶15. (C) In Anbar, a key Sunni tribal movement, backed by the Brother of deceased Shaykh Abdel Sattar Abu Risha who founded the Awakening (Sahwa) fighters, has allied with the IIP, a top IIP official told us on January 24. In Anbar, other tribal leaders are challenging the IIP, and another of Shaykh Abdel Sattar's brothers, Sheikh Ahmed Abu Risha, has claimed that his Iraqi Awakening Conference carries the mantle of the Awakening movements that chased Al-Qaida out of the province.

However, Sunni interlocutors have told us that Abu Risha's overtures to the IIP have splintered the Awakening movement, which had been perceived as a strong voting bloc in Anbar. Another strong Sunni tribal grouping, the Iraqi Salvation Council, features the telegenic Shaykh Ali Hatem and enjoys the apparent support of PM Maliki.

¶16. (C) Diyala is another key battleground. Sunnis They also face well organized challenges from Shi'a parties who could partner with minority Kurds to form a provincial government, which could lead to significant disappointment.

Ninewa

¶17. (C) In Ninewa, elections should result in a shift of political power from the current Kurd-dominated PC to a Council more representative of this majority Sunni Arab province. Sunni Arab participation in the political process could also drain support from the insurgency. A hard-line secular Sunni nationalist party, Hadba, has gained substantial support among anti-Kurd voters and will likely be among the top three vote-getters, with the Kurds and IIP. However, the IIP's willingness to ally with either Hadba or the Kurds could give it an over-sized role as king-maker. Sunni Arab votes likely will be split among several parties (including Hadba and IIP), which could dilute their influence. Because of the separate vote for three seats allocated Yezidi, Christian, and Shabak candidates, minority communities may be under-represented on the new PC.

Southern Provinces and Baghdad: Dawa-ISCI Showdown

¶18. (C) The competition is heated in Iraq's southern, predominantly Shi'a provinces, and Baghdad. In many provinces a majority or large minority of PC members are not running for re-election (only 8 of 35 are running for re-election in Basra), meaning that the new councils will have considerable new blood even if the parties hold their seats.

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¶19. (C) UIA coalition partners ISCI/Badr and Da'wa are squaring off throughout the southern provinces and in Baghdad

through their respective "State-of-Law" (Etilaf Dawlat al-Qanoon) and "Martyr of the Pulpit" (Shahid al-Mihrab) coalition lists. Fadhilah, Sadrist parties, and Dr. Ibrahim Jaafari's National Reform Trend may gain enough seats to become influential in some provinces. ISCI/Badr currently holds the Governorship and a governing plurality on the PCs in Najaf, Babil, Diwaniyah, and Dhi Qar provinces, while maintaining smaller PC pluralities in Baghdad, Wasit, and Muthanna. Da'wa controls the Prime Minister's Karbala Province, a coalition of Sadrists runs Maysan, and a Fadhilah Governor presides over the highly fractured Basra PC.

¶20. (C) Post contacts indicate widespread dissatisfaction with poor PC performance, which will hurt incumbents. Only the respective governing parties in Najaf and Karbala are favored to retain power, and several provinces (including Baghdad and Basra) will likely see changes in leadership. Most religious parties, with the notable exception of ISCI/Badr, have downplayed their religious credentials and are promoting technocratic and professional candidates. Support for Maliki appears strong throughout the region. Polling and anecdotal evidence suggest that his personal popularity may translate into increased support for Da'wa and his coalition slate.

Comment: Elections May Hasten Evolving Political Landscape

¶21. (C) In addition to helping entrench Iraq's Sunnis into the democratic political process by giving them a greater role in government, these elections provide Iraqis with an opportunity to choose between two competing visions for the country's future. PM Maliki advocates a government with strong central authority, a vision that contrasts sharply with ISCI and Kurdish support for federalism and substantial provincial and regional power. Maliki's vision is shared, however, by many Sunni Arab nationalists who are currently outside the governing coalition. Given that the Provincial Powers Law provides substantial power - including over security - to provincial governments, the formation of new provincial governments will bring into sharper focus these competing visions for Iraq.

¶22. (C) The elections could also hasten the fragmentation and collapse of the main Shi'a parliamentary bloc, the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), which has dominated Iraq's political landscape. Since it may be difficult for Dawa and ISCI to work together at the provincial level after the elections, the post-election period could witness the emergence of new governing coalitions. In a recent meeting, independent Shi'a UIA CoR member Dr. Jabir Habib Jabir told Poloff that the parties and lists that finish behind Dawa and ISCI will be king-makers in these elections. This could portend the formation of new coalitions at the national level. With the debate over the future shape of Iraq gaining prominence, pitting the PM and other proponents of a strong central government against ISCI, the Kurds, and others supporters of federalism, the ramifications of new alliances cannot be discounted. This debate could also accelerate a trend away from the sectarian politics that have dominated much of Iraq's post-Saddam history.

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